DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 627 CS 509 480

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TITLE How To Be Stupid: The Teachings of Channel One.
PUB DATE Jan 97
NOTE 11p.; Prepared for Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Awareness; *Audience Response; *Critical Viewing; Empowerment; Mass Media Role; Persuasive Discourse; Propaganda; Secondary Education; Secondary School Students; *Student Needs; *Television Commercials; *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS *Channel One; Educational Issues; Television News

ABSTRACT

The news on Channel One, with its impression of vague anxiety, looks and sounds like regular television news, only more so. In either case, the news is just "filler"--its real function is not journalistic but commercial, meant to lead into advertisements (ads). Mass advertising tends to assume that its audience will not be studying it carefully, thus, although students may "zone out" during Channel One's commercials, they are still likely to get the point, registering through their peripheral vision, and coming at them repeatedly--as all successful propaganda must. The point is: "Buy the power," but how is that "power" attained. Channel One is required in thousands of U.S. schools, part of the daily curriculum. One lesson seems to be "don't think." Channel One reassures its audience that it is fine not to think--in the ads, youngsters wonder about nothing but how "they" make that cereal so sugary, and beauties talk earnestly about their faces and Noxema face cream. Another lesson is "let us fix it." Ads promote stupidity by representing life as a series of simple problems, each soluble through the application of a commodity or other. Other lessons are "eat now," and "just say yes." Addiction is what they sell on Channel One. To recognize the falseness of propaganda, to learn to read its images, and also to read widely and discerningly enough to understand the differences between a "good" and a "bad" life: such are the aims of school--which is why Channel One should not be there. (NKA)

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HOW TO BE STUPID: THE TEACHINGS OF CHANNEL ONE

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Prepared for FAIR

January 1997

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How To Be Stupid: The Teachings of Channel One

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Of course, the news is not the point of Channel One—any more than it's the point of those commercial newscasts that many of us watch at home, night after night. If the basic aim of all such TV shows were really journalistic, it might be possible to glean from them some simple daily understanding of the world; but what we get these days from TV news is all loud, speedy filler, which—with minimal background, and no context—leaves the mind with nothing but some evanescent numbers, a helpless sense of general disaster, a heavy mental echo of official reassurance and (not too surprisingly) an overwhelming vague anxiety.

The news on Channel One leaves this impression—for it looks and sounds a lot like what we get on regular TV, only more so. Genially presented by its very young and pretty (and meticulously multiracial) team of anchors, that "news" is even more compressed and superficial than the stuff the networks give us: big accidents and major snowstorms, non-stories about the Super Bowl, horse-race coverage of domestic politics, bloody images of foreign terrorism, the occasional nerve-wracking and largely unenlightening visit to some scary place like Haiti or Tibet, and features—either grim or inspirational—on teens suffering from various high-profile torments (cancer, AIDS, addiction).

Of course, it being TV news, much of it is starkly painful—gory corpses in the streets of Tel Aviv, stretchers hefted from a midnight train wreck in suburban Maryland, survivors weeping after Oklahoma City, etc. When, on the other hand, it isn't horrible or sad, the news on Channel One is just confusing: a blast of isolated factoids about very distant and extremely complicated fights (e.g., Bosnia) and the equally complex—and, for that matter, distant—wrangles in the federal limelight (e.g., Clinton's budget vs. the Republicans'), all of it dressed up with the usual brilliant, zippy graphics, but none of it made clear or relevant enough to bear in mind. A student with a photographic memory (and a pedantic temperament) might be able to retain those random facts and figures, but most kids wouldn't be, nor is there any reason why they should.

As inane as it may seem, however, the news on Channel One, by turns horrific and confusing, does serve an important purpose—just like the news on regular TV. In either case, the news is, to repeat, no more than filler. Its real function is <u>not</u> journalistic but commercial, for it is meant primarily to get us ready for the ads. What this means is that the news must, on the one hand, keep us sitting there and watching, as an m.c. has to keep his audience mildly entertained between the acts; but it must also constantly efface itself, must keep itself from saying anything too powerful or even interesting, must never cut too deep or raise any really troubling questions, because it cannot ever be permitted to detract <u>in any way</u> from the commercials. Its aim must be, in short, to keep our eyes wide open and our minds asleep, so that the commercial will look good to us, sound true to us, and thereby work on us.

The Ads in Context

If the news on Channel One often seems perplexingly abstract, offering no clear impression from those many sudden, pointless names and numbers, that perplexity enhances the effect of the commercials, which—so brightly focused and so dazzlingly insistent—each stands out luminous

and sharp in the bewildering murk of factoids, like a high-tech lighthouse in a blinding fog. The routine horror of the news on Channel One also indirectly bolsters the commercials, which proffer their young viewers a fantastic antidote to all those tragic woes and bloody dangers. Skeletal and nearly bald, a real teenager with leukemia suffers through the agonies of chemotherapy—just after a fictitious teenaged girl (full-bodied, and with all her hair) finds happiness by using Clearasil. Buildings explode and people mourn in Bosnia (with its "brutal and complex story of ethnic hatreds and violent nationalism")—and then we see the Buffalo Bills, locked up and deprived of lunch by their demanding coach, chomp with furtive relish on their Snickers bars ("Hungry? Why wait?") And so on.

Surely all the mass advertising on the TV news thus benefits from such delicious contrast with the uglier images of telejournalism (as long as those other images are not too ugly). The ads on Channel One would seem to be especially powerful, however, because they thrive by contrast not just with the news before and after them, but with the whole boring, regimented context of the school itself. Imagine, or remember, what it's like to have to sit there at your desk, listening to your teacher droning on and on, with hours to go until you can get of there, you mind rebelling and your hormones raging. You're not only uptight, restless, hot and painfully self-conscious, furthermore, but probably dead-tired. (In many schools they show the program first thing in the morning.) It therefore must be sort of a relief when Channel One takes over, so you can lose yourself in its really cool graphics and its tantalizing burst of rock music—and in the advertisers' mind-blowing little fantasies of power: power through Pepsi, Taco Bell, McDonald's, Fruit-A-Burst and/or Gatorade ("Life Is a Sport. Drink It Up!"), power through Head 'n Shoulders, Oxy-10 and/or Pantene Pro-V Mousse ("....a stronger sense of style!"), power through Donkey Kong and/or Killer Instinct ("PLAY IT LOUD!"), and/or power through Reebok ("This is my planet!").

Buy the Power!

Of all the promises that advertising makes us, this promise of a certain rude empowerment—personal, immediate and absolute—is now the one that comes at us most often. (This trend is fairly recent. Until the mid-70's, mass advertising was far more various in its appeals.) Although this promise comes at every one of us hundreds (if not thousands) of times every day, we see it used most often in those ads that are directed at the weakest of us: the poor, women generally—and kids, as Channel One makes clear. Over and over, the product flashes into view as something that you ought to pay for not because you might enjoy it but because it promises to make you indestructible, as tough as nails, as hard as steel: a Superman or Superwoman. "I'm a guided missile," grunts the famous football player—so big and strong because of Reebok, evidently, so if you buy those shoes you'll be that big and strong (and famous). A hot babe beams at us and pops a stick of Doublemint—and then she's happily kissing this buff guy, whose hands are out of sight while she has her arms wrapped around his neck, so that it's obvious—just from a glance—who's in control. (Then there's a different babe, and the same thing happens.) Such fantasies appear to answer—and, of course, also exacerbate—the ferocious longing of their captive audience for freedom, independence, confidence and strength, which adolescents generally lack, and know they lack.

It isn't necessary to pay close attention to those loaded images in order for their message to get through to you. Indeed, all mass advertising tends to be devised on the correct assumption that its audience will not be studying it carefully, but merely flipping through the magazines, driving right on past the billboards, and only half-watching—or even fast-forwarding—the TV spots. Thus the kids required to sit through Channel One, although they might appear to zone out

during the commercials, are likely still to get the point, which is conveyed explosively enough to register through their peripheral vision, and which thus comes at them repeatedly—as all successful propaganda must.

And that point, again, is very simple (which is, of course, another requisite of winning propaganda). That point is: "Buy the power." As simple as it sounds, however, there is much more to the ads than that—for advertising never merely makes its most apparent pitch, but at the same time always offers up a vision of how you should live, and of how the world around you ought to be. It's one thing to say that the ads idealize power and identify the products with that power. But what exactly is that "power"? And what precisely is it that the advertising asks its teenaged audience to do, and think, in order to attain that "power"? These are crucial questions, since Channel One is, after all, by now required in thousands of our nation's schools, as a daily part of the curriculum. What, then, are its lessons?

Lesson #1 "Watch."
This is in fact the fundamental teaching of each ad, expertly hammered home by every virtuoso shot, every pointless, jarring cut, every stupefying jangle of computer graphics. It's also the most basic teaching of the ads en masse: for everybody in those ads is always staring at something (either at the product or at us), and is also himself or herself spectacular: as icy-cool and drop-dead gorgeous as the product. Now and then we see a kid contentedly on-line, but no kid depicted in the ads is ever reading, ever thinking (see #2), nor ever even unself-consciously conversing with some other kid(s). Sometimes—briefly, just before their rescue by the product—they might look anxious, lonely, doubtful. Otherwise, they are all alike continuously rapt in a Spielbergian state of blithe, wide-eyed wonderment, watching it all, and loving every minute of it—just as the student audience is meant to do. (Of course, Channel One includes many a loud ad for movies and TV from Fox, Time-Warner, Universal and other such educators.)

The ads sometimes baldly celebrate that posture of euphoric gaping—as in an amazing spot for Skittles, a 30-second masterpiece that might be taken as an accurate dream-vision of what Channel One itself is all about. On the slate-gray face of a dead planet, under a luminous night sky, a bevy of cartoonish reptiles (each a different Skittle-color) slowly poke their cute, round, bleary dino-faces out of their respective hidey-holes, like prairie dogs just waking up. "Yum?" each one says groggily: "Yum?" Suddenly a shimmering wave of multicolored light hits the horizon and then flares across the sky—and all the little dinos perk right up and follow its swift course in pop-eyed wonder, together swaying from left to right in perfect unison. In the wake of that celestial surge there is a shower of—meteors? No: Skittles, which drop and bounce amid the rooted crowd like day-glo-colored balls of manna, and the critters noisily gulp them down. "Yum," they now say, getting sleepy: "Yum." They sink back down into their holes. Finally, there's a long shot of the ruined planet and its many-hued Saturnian ring, which—we now see—constantly revolves around the sphere, so that that same exhilarating surge of colored light must dazzle those hole-dwellers regularly every day. We then hear this command, uttered in a childish whisper (and also printed on the screen): "Skittles. Taste the rainbow!"

The groggy little ones, their empty world, the daily light-show and its putatively yummy vision of the product: in its grotesque way the vision functions as a tidy allegory of Channel One itself, whose viewers are likewise always being promised an immediate reward for their continued watching.

Lesson #2 "Don't think."

The sort of watching that is urged on teenagers by Channel One (and also urged on all of us by advertising generally) involves no reflection, no interpretation: on the contrary. First of all, the spectacle is much too fast and noisy to permit, much less encourage, any thoughtfulness; and yet the ads discourage thinking not just automatically, because of their distracting visuals and manic pace, but also, it would seem, deliberately, by taking every opportunity to celebrate stupidity. While forever hyping its commitment to the endless sharpening of the teenaged mind ("Imagine knowing everything," etc.), Channel One continually assures its audience, through the commercials, that it's really cool to be an idiot.

This is partly a result of the great corporate interest—prevalent throughout the entertainment industries—in exploiting the inevitable rebelliousness of adolescent boys. Whether on Channel One or regular TV, the ads aimed at that uneasy group appeal to a defiant boorishness that, in the real world, routinely lands a lot of kids in jail, and that the movie studios and video-game manufacturers endlessly glamorize in works like *Happy Gilmore*, *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* and *Down Periscope* ("See it and Win!"), Virtual Boy, Donkey Kong 2 and Killer Instinct ("PLAY IT LOUD!"), among many others advertised on Channel One. Since that loutish posture is as anti-intellectual as it is anti-social, the celebration of stupidity in Channel One's commercials owes a lot to that particularly noxious form of target marketing.

And yet it isn't only Channel One's male-oriented ads that say it's cool to be an idiot: all the advertising makes that point repeatedly, and makes it to the viewers of both sexes—for advertising (which is, of course, a form of propaganda) must forever tell its audience not to think.

Those cuddly reptiles gulping Skittles are just one species of the many simple, hungry organisms that Channel One's commercials represent as excellent consumers. Such beings know all you need to know: any higher inquiry—or any inquiry at all—is laughable, the ads imply. "Woah!" breathes a frenetic youngster, having just wolfed down a very crunchy spoonful of the cereal in the bowl he's gripping: "How do they cram all that graham into Golden Grahams?" A halo of bright multicolored question marks pulsates and jiggles all around his head as he engages in moronic speculation—rendered for us in high-speed cartoons—about exactly how they cram all that graham. ("But how?" he finally asks again, then shrugs and takes another mouthful.)

Although portrayed as god-like, the big celebrities who do the ads on Channel One are likewise hailed for having heads of near-perfect emptiness. "Some people say I've got too much on my mind, " Shaquille O'Neal murmurs at us, sitting tall in an expensive leather lounger (slick hip-hop bopping in the background). "Movies, music, toys. Correction: There's only one thing in my head: the championship." (Quick shots of Shaq looking like a winner.) "That's what's in my head," he says, then adds, "This is my planet" (and there's the Reebok logo on his chest).

Over and over, the ads idealize ignorance: like the kid who wonders about nothing but how "they" make that cereal so sugary, and like the famous athlete in whose mind (he says) there's nothing but the fact that he's a famous athlete, the ads' countless momentary heroes each know only what the advertisers want their audience to know. The beauties talking earnestly about their faces and Noxema, or about their hair and Pantene Pro-V Mousse, and the dog who drinks a Pepsi (in a happy dream he's having about drinking Pepsi), and the animated M&M's who would do anything to get into that ad for M&M's ("I wanna be in that commercial!"): all those empty-headed figures speeding through the ads on Channel One are nothing but role models for the

spread of Channel One's commercial propaganda, which wants its youthful audience to be just as thoughtless, easily distracted and obsessed. Thus those speedy figures are, in fact, the opposite of proper students (and therefore don't belong in our schools).

Lesson #3 "Let Us Fix It."

The ads on Channel One also promote stupidity by representing all of life as nothing but a series of extremely simple problems, each soluble through the immediate application of some very smart commodity or other. To all your problems, Channel One keeps telling its young audience, we have the solutions. This myth promotes stupidity, first of all, by ruling out all problems any higher, deeper, more complex or general than, say, your boredom or your dandruff. Such trivialization must make students blind not only to the daunting truths and major questions of philosophy and history, but also to the harder, richer pleasures still available beyond the screaming little world of Channel One (where, for example, "nothin's more intense than slammin' a Dew!").

While grossly over-simplifying everything, moreover, that myth of the advertisers' total competence, of their ability to solve, at once, your every "problem," also promotes stupidity by suggesting that there is no worthwhile knowledge other than the knowledge of elite technicians (who are, of course, all working for Nintendo, Reebok, Mars, AT&T and the other major corporate advertisers, while you're just sitting there in front of that TV). Channel One's commercials are all, finally, celebrations of technology: not only are the ads themselves mind-bending feats of digital f/x, but they all tout the video games and pimple creams and running shoes as masterworks of technical design—even tasty treats like Golden Grahams ("But how?"), and that "scorching new four-alarm, double-decker taco from Taco Bell," are sold primarily as the efficient and ingenious products of those corporations' labs.

It is their mystique of high technology that finally makes those ads and goods alike appear so very powerful—and that is meant to make the rest of us feel helpless, needy, stupid. (The news on Channel One continually reconfirms that view, through numerous awestruck reports on seeming scientific breakthroughs.) "If you have any power at all, you can thank us for it," the ads tell their young viewers: "All that stuff your parents never dreamed of...AT&T is bringing it all within your reach!" proclaims a commercial for AT&T ("Your true choice"), which ends by asking for submissions to an essay contest on the theme, "How Technology Has Benefited My Education."

Just as ads have done for well over a century, the ads on Channel One routinely try to wow their audience with brisk bits of pseudo-scientific hooey, along with many clever mock-explanatory visuals. "The exclusive pro-vitamin formula penetrates, improving your hair," we're assured by a sweet, breathy female voice, as we watch a fleet of gently tumbling golden pellets disappear into the auburn scalp of an expensive-looking redhead. And in another ad, an exuberant "science teacher," posed before his bunsen burners and reports, tells how he managed to teach "Chad" (whom we see repeatedly in handsome close-up) that "science is a beautiful thing," because "science is the key to clear skin." ("The medicine in Oxy 10 penetrates, it helps eliminate pimples fast," the "teacher" says by way of explanation.) He concludes: "Scientific equation: Oxy-10 equals great skin!"

Again, these are devices—the fake "authority," the vaguely scientific-sounding mumbo-jumbo—that advertising has been using on the public since the 19th century. Their patent falseness

makes them grossly inappropriate for use inside our schools—where children ought to learn to think, not to be taken in.

Lesson #4 "Eat Now."

"While you need almost nothing in your head, you must put this—and lots of this—into your mouth." Of all the lessons taught day after day on Channel One, this one may have the most immediate effect, because that visual stimulus—watching someone chewing, sipping, gulping, licking his/her lips—is irresistible, especially when you're hungry and/or thirsty. This the tobacco companies have always understood. Before they voluntarily went off the air in 1970, they had derived tremendous benefit from their TV commercials, which were the only form of advertising that could actually show someone lighting up and taking that first deep, delicious drag—a spectacle that makes any smoker want to smoke (and that therefore keeps on popping up in so many movies and TV shows aimed at teenaged viewers, who now smoke in growing numbers.)

The same tantalizing tactic is routine on Channel One—just as it is on regular TV, especially at those moments when your lunch or dinner has been half-digested and it's time for the cookies and/or nuts and/or potato chips, the Coke or Pepsi, Coors or Budweiser. Because teens tend almost always to be hungry, and because they're not allowed to eat in school, the many spots for candy, pizza, chewing gum, tacos, cereal and burgers, for Pepsi, Gatorade and Mountain Dew, are probably the most successful ads on Channel One, which shows—by far—more ads for drink and munchies than for any other category of product. Stuck there with their stomachs growling, the viewers of Channel One must feel downright tormented by the last shot in those ads for Snickers (with its dark nougat, chunks of peanut, gooey caramel, rippling chocolate): "Hungry? Why wait?"

Thus those sleepy critters gulp their Skittles, that curious kid scarfs down his Golden Grahams, those happy diners at McDonald's chow down on their Big Mac's, and so on. And yet there's evidently more to the appetite(s) aroused by Channel One than the mere biological need for carbohydrates. The teenagers are hungry not for bread alone but for autonomy, security, control; and so the ads don't simply make the munchies look delicious, but represent them as a tasty means to personal "empowerment." "How does Shaquille O'Neal get fired up for a game? With a scorching new four-alarm double-decker taco from Taco Bell!"—and, after tearing into one of those hot, gloppy, crunchy little beauties, Shaq goes tearing down the court—in flames! (And he scores!) And yet it is the girls more than the boys who are thus endlessly assured that eating makes you powerful. "Well duh, of course it's delicious!" snaps a pretty adolescent blonde about her Frosted Cheerios, and then a pert (and light-skinned) African-American pre-teen confides, "It's way too good for adults!" (Each girl hefts a spoon and holds a giant bowlful of the stuff.) And it's the girls who are enticed by Channel One's commercials for such cheap treats as Doublemint and Winterfresh, which taste so good that they'll make you taste good, and therefore make you overpoweringly delectable, just like the product (a promise made through countless careful images of slender, lovely chewers variously "in control").

Lesson #5 "You're Ugly."

Although it hypes itself as a brave new instrument of teenage "mind expansion," Channel One—that is, its owners and its sponsors—would certainly prefer that its young audience not become acute enough to grasp certain glaring contradictions in each broadcast.

For example, there's a huge—and highly profitable—contradiction within many of the ads themselves: between the likely physical effects of all that grease and sugar advertised so festively, and the tiptop physical condition of those great-looking hunks and babes and famous athletes doing all the eating and the drinking in the ads. In fact, the diet advertised on Channel One would—and actually does—make kids obese: fatter nowadays than ever, the statistics tell us. But such reports cannot compete with those deliciously misleading images of, say, the Buffalo Bills all eating Snickers, or Shaquille O'Neal getting "fired up for a game" by eating stuff from Taco Bell. Such images insist, obliquely, that all that fattening food won't make you fat at all but (magically!) exceptionally fit—just as the images aimed at the girls imply that a diet of M&M's and fries and Pepsi won't inevitably make you tubby, give you zits and cavities and dull your hair, but will somehow help to make you just as slender, buxom, bright-eyed, radiant and peppy as those primping, winking models, who seem to have those buff boys under control.

Although they certainly don't want their viewers to be unattractive, the advertisers do want all of us to <u>feel</u> as fat, zitty, flaky, haggard, flabby, pale and smelly as it takes to get us buying what we're told we need so as to come across like winners. As old as advertising itself (and especially widespread since the Depression), this subversive tactic too has no place in the classroom, whose adolescent inmates generally feel bad enough about themselves already—as Channel One reminds them often. "NERVOUS about going back to school?" demands an ad for Clearasil in one September broadcast. "No wonder. With those ZITS." The numerous teen-oriented spots for skin creams, dandruff shampoos, mousse, breath-sweeteners and conditioners (the second biggest product category on Channel One) make clear exactly how the students are advised to see themselves: as horrors, in dire need of the assurances, advice and goods pitched "free" in each day's broadcast.

Lesson #6 "Just Say Yes."

Aside from the upbeat commercial spots for edibles, cosmetics, sportswear and entertainment, Channel One's broadcasts each include as well a number of solemn public service ads (PSAs) made mostly by the Ad Council on behalf of various pro bono enterprises. Such sound directives—telling kids to use their seat belts, work for charitable outfits, wear their helmets when they go skateboarding, stay away from crack, recycle—might appear to justify those daily broadcasts in our nation's schools, by making Channel One appear as morally impeccable and socially progressive. (There can be little doubt that Channel One includes those PSAs for that very purpose, as a way to disarm resistance and muffle criticism.)

For all their apparent civic-mindedness, however, the PSAs actually make Channel One a <u>more</u> effective means of selling teenagers on all that dubious merchandise. First of all, those messages too are nothing more than propaganda, however noble or benign their seeming purpose. They therefore have no place in any worthwhile classroom, because they work around the mind, not for or with it—exactly like the ads for Taco Bell and Frosted Cheerios and Killer Instinct. Altruistic it may be, but a pithy tag like "ASPHALT BITES," or "DO SOMETHING GOOD," or "FRIENDS DON'T LET FRIENDS DRIVE DRUNK" is no more intellectually demanding than, say, "BITE THE BURST" or "DO THE DEW" or "SKITTLES: TASTE THE RAINBOW," both types of appeal depending on the absolute passivity of those young minds arranged in even rows before the monitor.

Equally propagandistic, the commercials and the PSAs on Channel One are also mutually complementary—for those kinder, gentler spots actually enhance the crass commercial pitch by

masking its true character. Thanks to them, the students can more readily half-believe that all of this is "educational"—that this relentless daily come-on has some "higher purpose." Channel One can't really be telling us to think about nothing but ourselves (can it?), if it includes that moving voluntarist promo for the Points of Light Foundation: "DO SOMETHING GOOD. FEEL SOMETHING REAL." Nor could the program really be requiring us to sit here gaping at TV commercials, just like at home—because Channel One is also urging us to try some jazz, check out some modern art: "ARTS AND HUMANITIES. THERE'S SOMETHING IN IT FOR YOU," concludes a nice spot for the National Cultural Alliance. And of course there are all those scary messages from the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, played every week on Channel One: crafty teenaged pushers lurking in the schoolyard, or even in the hallways, offering their wares—and all the younger kids, so tough and self-possessed, just tell those predators to beat it! Channel One must really want us to have independent minds, if it keeps on warning us like that!

And yet the contradiction here is total: for the only moral difference between the individual drug-dealers and the corporate advertisers in our nation's schools is one of scale—the advertisers are immeasurably richer, and have done a lot more harm. Both work full-time to lure the children into absolute and permanent dependency, and both do so exclusively for profit's sake. Both, therefore, would prefer that their young targets be ill-educated on the subject of addiction. Thus the advertisers help put out that cautionary propaganda, which demonizes the individual (black) pusher—and thereby helps obscure the advertisers' own addictive mission.

Addiction 101

For it is addiction that the advertisers sell on Channel One (and everywhere else): they want to hook the kids forever: to have them needing all that junk forever: to have them all forever paying for it. While the stuff they sell does not, of course, induce, like heroin or crack, a catastrophic physical dependency, the way they sell it powerfully glamorizes the destructive spiritual condition of all addicts, whatever they may crave: the desperate neediness (you need it now!) and ever-more-acute insatiability (now you need more!). Thus, despite their many stern denunciations of the illegal market in the streets, the advertisers only make such drug use all the likelier and more widespread, by urging children—daily, hourly—into just the sort of appetite that, in many people, must be fed, in one way or another.

First of all, the ads teach that you can and should surrender to your craving right away: "Hungry? Why Wait?" The jokey tone of the solicitation (which is the usual tone of advertising to the young) cannot quite hide the deadly earnestness of that appeal, which the commercials make incessantly, both verbally and visually. You may be told to "do the Dew" or "bite the Burst" or "taste the rainbow," but the imperative is quite the same in every case, and reconfirmed in image after image: Eat it, drink it, wear it, play it now. With their extreme compression and extraordinary vividness (and, of course, their economic program of addicting everyone ASAP), the ads present a world in which there isn't any saving, any planning toward the buying of the product, nor any pleasurable anticipation of the buying of the product—nor even any savoring of that product in itself (which once gone is forgotten, and you want another one). In that fantastic world, the only things are you and it; and since it's yours—and even if it isn't yours—you take it, and you take it now ("Why wait?").

While thus continuously urging your immediate self-indulgence, the ads on Channel One also promote the addict's attitude through the usual psychotic overestimation of the modest items that they sell. It isn't just a candy bar, it isn't just a pair of pants—it's a delirium, an orgasm, an

apocalypse of fun. The admakers use every visual and aural means available to make the everyday experience of tasting this or wearing that seem like a sort of psychedelic wet-dream, in which you feel like you've never felt before: ecstatic and all-powerful.

Thus the products are routinely advertised as working just like drugs: you swallow them, and go delightfully insane. Kids gulp candy or chomp into burgers or take crunchy bites of cereal—and their eyes light up, they beam and laugh and dance like lunatics. A ballerina pops a stick of Winterfresh, and breaks into exuberant motion (and a line of little girls in tutus imitates her buoyant steps). A quartet of hip-looking guys take slugs of Mountain Dew ("nothin's more intense!")—and lift off, wearing rocket-belts, each one embracing an exotic-looking babe. (The whole ad is an inordinate parody of the James Bond movies.) A blasé youngster sitting on his bed, and bored out of his skull by his Dad's earnest lecture on the birds and bees, discreetly pops a Starburst—and then obviously comes. While Dad obliviously natters on, the kid imagines a tremendous wave, then sits bolt upright with a look of wired euphoria, and then he's suddenly a joyous swimmer in deep bright blue waters, amid giant floating chunks and slices of fresh fruit. ("The juice is loose!" screams out the all-male chorus as the boy settles back looking slyly satiated and that big fool leaves the room.)

Such images can only lead—probably have led already—to a widespread sense of disappointment (and have no doubt contributed as well to countless cases of emotional disorder among teenagers). The problem here is not that kids will actually believe that munching Skittles is like dropping acid. Rather, it's the likelihood that all that wild music and intoxicating imagery, inappropriately linked with mere consumer goods, has established an impossible standard of enjoyment. Every pleasure, the commercials say, must be a major kick such as you've never felt in all your life (and such, of course, as you can only get from PepsiCo or Mars or Reebok or Nintendo). Thus that propaganda makes it ever harder to recall what actual pleasures should be like; and so it's only natural that the kids bombarded by those ads would come to feel ever more jaded, ever more blasé—numb enough, perhaps, to need those still more dangerous stimulants that Channel One so piously deplores.

To recognize the falseness of that propaganda, to learn to read its images, and also to read widely and discerningly enough to start to understand the all-important differences between a good life and a bad one: such are the proper aims of school—which is why Channel One should not be there.